

Manx Notes 68 (2006)

MANX NATIONAL MUSIC (1898)

“PREFACE”

[iii] The melodies of the Songs, Carols, and Dances contained in this Volume are the practical outcome of a project formed many years ago, and since often discussed by The Deemster Gill and his friend, Dr Clague, to collect and preserve from the oblivion into which it was rapidly passing all that remained of the national music of the Isle of Man.

That the Island has possessed and still possesses a distinctive ancient national music of its own, is a fact as interesting as it was, till within the last two or three years, little known, even by those best versed in its history and the customs of its people.

With the exception of thirteen tunes, very imperfectly written down and arranged, published in 1820, under the title of *The Mona Melodies*, and of two or three others which exist in manuscript, Manx Music has remained oral and traditional, and although at one time well known and in every sense popular, it has of late years, with the declining national language, almost entirely disappeared.

Fortunately there are still in the remote parts of the Island a few old people who possess a knowledge of this ancient music, but who, with characteristic modesty keep it to themselves, reluctant to sing the songs of their forefathers, lest the rising generation should, as indeed they often do, receive them with a lack of that reverence which they inspire in themselves. Unless they be preserved by writing, this knowledge must inevitably die within a very few years.

The object of the original projectors was to collect, record, and hand down all Manx National Melodies which could be found, whether printed, manuscript, or oral, ignoring any known to be not older than the present century; and as to those which had not been previously written, to take these down, from the persons who had a knowledge of them, with all the variations and imperfections due to oral transmission.

With this object in view they invited the co-operation of Mr W.H. Gill, of Sidcup, Kent (a brother of Deemster Gill), who willingly joined them in the Summer of 1894, and a systematic search for Manx Music was then commenced.

Of music older than the present century none was found to have been printed except the thirteen tunes contained in *Mona Melodies*—a few of which had since been reprinted in various forms; and of manuscript music two or three tunes only were discovered.

The task was then undertaken of writing down the remaining mass of traditional melodies from the singing of those who still retained a knowledge of them, and who were found scattered over the whole of the Island. Tunes were obtained from every town and every parish, except one in which a thorough search has not yet been

made—Dr Clague working specially in the Southern parishes, Mr W.H. Gill and Deemster Gill through the rest of the Island.

The result of the search, both as regards quantity and quality, far exceeded what was expected—and a large manuscript collection of over 260 local melodies has been secured. Of these some are complete, some are fragments only, and some are variations of other tunes.

It cannot be claimed that all the sources of information have been exhausted, but considerable trouble has been taken to find persons who possess any knowledge of the subject.

It is interesting to note that the contributors were chiefly men; that except in the case of the Carols, which are more generally known, and of a few other melodies, the various tunes were known to a very few besides the individuals from whom they were obtained, that more than half of the tunes which had been published in 1820 were entirely unknown, and that copies of the publication are extremely rare.

It is hoped ere long to publish the whole of this collection, with or without explanatory and other notes, for the use and information of those interested in the subject; meanwhile a selection of the melodies is given in this volume arranged for the Pianoforte by Mr W.H. Gill.

[iv] After the search for melodies had proceeded to some extent, and their number, beauty, and national characteristics had been discussed, it was decided that the further object should be aimed at—of harmonising and arranging some of the melodies so as to adapt them for modern performance—vocal and instrumental—and thus make the best Manx Music generally known and once more heard.

Accordingly a selection was made and a volume of *Manx National Songs*, with English words, was prepared by Mr W.H. Gill, and published last year by Messrs. Boosey & Co., as a Volume of their Royal Edition of National Songs.

The present Volume contains a more extended selection including songs, carols, and dance music, arranged for the pianoforte

In the case of both Volumes the harmonies, the accompaniments, the symphonies and the arrangements generally are the work exclusively of Mr W.H. Gill.

These Volumes are not intended to supersede the work originally contemplated. They however attain the original object in so far that they record most of the melodies of the general collection. These melodies can be studied, notwithstanding the added harmonies and arrangements which form no part of what was collected but are used merely as vehicles for the melodies, to ensure their being sung or played. Opinions may differ as to whether these harmonies and arrangements are justified or appropriate, they are given for what they are worth, and subject to the remarks on them in the “Sketch” by Mr W.H. Gill, which follows this Preface.

The title *Manx National Music* is used in the sense only that the melodies, with many others now lost, are known to have been, in past days, popular and in general use in the Isle of Man, most of them associated with Manx words.

In the general collection and in this selection from it, tunes will be found which have evidently been imported, others which although probably native have a foreign complexion, and others again of great beauty and of undoubted antiquity, which appear to exist in this Island only, and possess characteristics distinctly local, especially those in the so-called “Dorian Mode,” on the lines of which a strikingly large proportion of Manx Music is constructed.

In many cases it is as difficult, if indeed it is not impossible, to ascertain the original form of any given melody, as it is to discover its nationality; both must, in the large majority of cases, remain a matter of conjecture. The tunes in the general collection are recorded as they have been actually found to exist.

The work of discriminating between what is native and what imported, of deciding when and whence importation came, of determining whether or not the more ancient sacred music was introduced by the Church, and if so, whether before or since the Reformation, and of solving many other problems to which the general collection naturally gives rise, is one full of interest and of difficulty.

It involves more research than the compilers have, at present, time to devote to it; but being convinced that if adequately performed it would result in a valuable chapter in the history of national music, and knowing, as they do, that by far the greatest number of the tunes have never before been published or even reduced to writing, and come from a source which is rapidly being lost, the compilers consider they are doing a useful and patriotic work in rescuing these tunes and placing them on record for future use.

J. FRED. GILL.

J. CLAGUE.

W.H. GILL.

DOUGLAS, ISLE OF MAN.

1st January, 1898.

Source: “Preface,” *Manx National Music: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster J.F. Gill, Dr J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1898) iii–iv.

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